



Lumpia in the Time of Coronavirus: Food and Community on Facebook's Subtle Asian Traits

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Self-isolation makes the heart grow fonder.

Self-isolation also makes you realize that you took many, many things for granted.

Spend enough time on social media and you're bound to come across all the things that people miss – or are missing out on – during this time: going to the gym, going to the movies, weddings, graduations. And of course, one of life's simplest pleasures: eating with family and friends.

Nowhere is this more evident than on Subtle Asian Traits, the wildly popular Facebook group that, since its inception in September 2018, has garnered over 1.8 million followers from Asian communities all over the world. Many— though not all— are second-generation Asians and onward; many of them also live in Western or primarily English-speaking countries.

I was invited to join the page by a classmate during my senior year of college. Since then, I've added my sister and a few family friends. It's become a source of humor, a home for inside jokes, and a space for cultural solidarity. You don't have to explain why you have a massive collection of food-shaped erasers, or why you think that Korean fried chicken is a game-changer. You just share the post and fellow Asians get it— no explanation needed. On SAT, boba obsessions, pho fixations, and sushi cravings are always in vogue, with thousands of memes and videos reinforcing food's central role in the Asian diasporic identity. What shame we may have had as children over what our lunch boxes contained is being gradually replaced by a sense of pride as Pan-Asian and fusion cuisine continues to garner well-deserved attention.

But there's another layer that goes beyond the mere consumption of Asian foods: where do you eat, and with whom? Is it during the weekend at your family's favorite dim sum restaurant, where you sit for ages after the meal is over and listen to your mother and your aunties squabble over who pays the check? Is it during the holidays when relatives descend on your house and the table is a mix between biryani and honey-roasted ham? Do you go for boba as a group after your organization's weekly meetings? Homemade mandu with your grandparents on special occasions?

All this to say that food brings people together and the Asian community is no exception. It serves as a touchstone not just for our families, but also for our ethnic identities. The food we eat is a tangible expression of who we are, where we come

from, and where we've been, all laid out in a way that can be bonded over and consumed communally. Even the way in which food is served points to the values of a collective atmosphere. Dishes are served in a family-style manner and everyone passes the plate and shares.

Of course, COVID-19 has changed all of that. Social distancing means changing how we eat and where we eat. Dine-in options are limited if offered at all. Gatherings of any size are generally discouraged. The lack of quick access to restaurants and eateries has been a shock to our (admittedly) privileged lifestyles.

On *Subtle Asian Traits*, the diasporic community lamented the closing of their favorite eateries, some of which offered food that was already difficult to come by, or mourned the loss of spaces where food and camaraderie could be enjoyed. But thanks to the proliferation of video-sharing apps and social simulation games, the SAT community rallied and found ways to virtually break bread.

Nintendo's social simulation video game, *Animal Crossing*, has played an interesting role in facilitating food-based interactions. Ever since social distancing was enacted, virtual restaurants exploded. The SAT group page is now filled with members promoting the dim sum restaurants or hotpot hangouts they designed and then inviting other members to join them. Some have asked family members to play along and even encouraged simulations of typical family dynamics: arguing over whose recipe of

Hainanese chicken rice is the best and of course, bickering over whose turn it is to pay the (fake) bill.

In addition, Tik Tok – the popular video-sharing social network service – has allowed for members of the SAT community to dig deeper and truly connect with the roots of the food we consume. More than just shooting and sharing comedic lip sync videos, Tik Tok has become a space for the SAT community to showcase the nuances between different regional cuisines. Homemade brown sugar tapioca pearls, bánh da lợn, and ube-flavored dalgona coffee are just some of the foods that have undergone scrutiny as SAT home chefs video their attempts to recreate the flavors they miss so much, all the while encouraging others to weigh in with their suggestions, or otherwise share the video in hopes of inspiring someone to try something new.

The food we eat (and even for that matter, the ones we don't) tells a story and reveals something about our choices and our histories, both as individuals and as part of a greater collective. And though it may yet be some time until we can pack into restaurants the way we used to, social media has enabled the Asian community to still feel like a community by innovating in the ways that we share the food— and by extension, identity and culture — that matters to us.

I pondered the importance and influence of food and community within my own family during my recent visit to my parents' house, where I spent most of it sitting at the

kitchen table, eating fresh Pad See Ew and Indonesian-style chicken curry. I paid attention as my mother took pictures and videos of our food and posted it online; I also took note of the subsequent comments from family and friends who missed her cooking and missed gathering around the table with us.

Before I left, my mother opened the family's second freezer and she proceeded to fill a large Styrofoam cooler with frozen seafood, bulgogi, turon, and one of my all-time favorites: lumpia, the Philippines' version of the spring roll. After she was satisfied that my own freezer would be stocked for the foreseeable future, my mother gave me a hug and said, "When you cook these, don't forget to share, okay? Food tastes better with friends."

I returned her hug and thought once more of simulated restaurants and video recipes. I couldn't agree more.



Works Cited

"Subtle Asian Traits." Facebook, Sept. 2018,

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